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Cranking up the European Community

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IS the European Community about to get moving again? After years of virtual stagnation, there are encouraging signs of revival. But there is also a hitch.

Twenty-five years ago the community was seen as a bright hope in Western Europe and the United States. Its formation in the 1950s did indeed achieve the historic reconciliation of France and Germany, which has been the foundation for postwar political stability in Western Europe. Its aim was first to create a broad Common Market among its members which would foster efficient and dynamic economies, and ultimately to evolve into a political and economic entity that would play a major role in world affairs. The US supported such a united Europe as a potential partner.

The community did succeed in dismantling internal tariffs and quotas and developing a common agricultural program, but it failed to go on to open up the internal market as planned. Nor has it achieved the political unity or global role envisaged for it.

For two decades the progress of the community was impeded by major obstacles. In the 1960s, it was mainly General de Gaulle, who blocked the entry of the British and also hamstrung the community institutions by insisting on a national veto. In the 1970s, after Britain and three smaller states joined the six original members, the plans for closer economic and political union were derailed by the oil shocks and recession, and by extended squabbling about the British share of the common budget and the costly common agricultural policy, as well as by negotiations for the entry of Spain and Portugal. The community did, however, initiate regular consultation on foreign policy and a limited monetary agreement among some members.

By 1984, the community had cleared away a number of these impediments. The question was whether it could regain the earlier momentum:

- Since then the members have been concerned about their sluggish economies and their 12 million jobless. In a period of rapid technological change, they see Europe lagging behind the US and Japan. They are convinced that growth and dynamism depend on developing a liberalized internal market in which goods, people, services, and capital move freely and easily.
- Members of the community also resent their limited influence with the United States on matters directly affecting their security and economies, such as "star wars" and the United States budget deficit. They believe they can enhance their influence only by unifying their positions. A sort of European identity is emerging.
- The problem is means. For the founders, the way was to be some sort of quasi-federal entity. The Court of Justice, the Parliament, and the Commission, which were to represent the community's common interests, reflect that concept. But that is not a practical goal for the current leaders. They and their bureaucrats are not yet ready to relinquish powers to the community.
- Yet they face a dilemma. Experience has shown that primary reliance on unanimity for making decisions is too slow and cumbersome to make the community effective in meeting many concerns of the members.

Two years ago the Parliament took the initiative for reform by developing a draft statute to strengthen the institutions and decisionmaking of the community. This went too far for some members, but it forced them to name an ad hoc committee to make recommendations to be considered by the European Council, composed of the heads of government of the member states.

In December the European Council, meeting in Luxembourg, approved a package of reforms based on weakened versions of those recommendations. The central decision was to liberalize the internal market fully by 1992 and to revise the community treaties to permit approval by majority vote for many of the necessary implementing measures. They slightly expanded the role of the Parliament in policymaking; adopted formal procedures for coordinating foreign policy; incorporated the European monetary system into the community framework. Though modest, this package could provide a basis for reviving the community, if vigorously carried out.

But first, with the treaty revisions, the package must be approved by the 12 members' parliaments. There snags have already arisen. In Denmark the parliament at once disapproved of the reforms as going too far. Since opinion polls show a plurality of Danes favor the changes and 60 percent support the community, the government plans a referendum in late February. It is to be hoped that will dispose of the issue.

If not, and the others ratify the package, as seems almost certain (though Italy thinks it too limited), the community will face a serious constitutional crisis. My guess is that the other members will find a way to go ahead with or without Denmark. The success of the community in this new effort is very much in the US interest. It should contribute over time to better cooperation between the US and Western Europe.

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